

CHAPTER 5

Greek Gift and “Given Being”: The Libidinal Economies of Vernon Lee’s Supernatural Tales

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Nowhere in Vernon Lee’s writing are objects more pernicious than when figured as gifts. Ostensibly benign acts of giving frequently emerge as baited offerings: offerings that have the potential to draw the recipient into a complex web of obligation, debt and depletion. In Lee’s 1896 tale “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady,” three figures at court offer up an extravagant medley of gifts in order to secure the young Prince’s patronage; through their beneficence, they believed, “Alberic [would] be turned to profit” (Lee 2006, 196). An earlier tale, “Lady Tal” (1892), describes how the eighteen year-old Lady Atalanta loses her aged husband within a year of their marriage; “Tal” is the beneficiary of her late husband’s extensive wealth but is subject to a humiliating and punitive codicil (*à la* Edward Casaubon). Exposing a philosophy of giving that is honorific in nature and which tends towards the creation of obligatory attachments, the tales reveal Lee’s mistrust of the practice of gift-giving; a mistrust which culminated in an attack on “making presents” in her 1904 work *Hortus Vitae*. Here, Lee’s own “philosophy of presents” which laments the “specious air of [...] disinterestedness” attached to the gift anticipates Marcel Mauss in his belief in a “polite fiction” that conceals “obligation and economic self-interest”: the driving force of gift-exchange (Lee 2008, 66; Mauss 2002, 4).

This essay will argue that, in line with later theorists of the gift, Lee interpreted the circular or reciprocal structure of the gift-event as evidence of the activity’s economic form. However, for Lee, the treachery of the gift exceeds the latent economy considered more recently in gift theory.¹ “Gift-giving” is a privileged form of symbolic activity in Lee’s

¹ In *Given Time: Counterfeit Money*, Jacques Derrida considers the phenomenological impossibility of the gift outside of economic activity. He writes: “the gift, if there is any, would no doubt be related to economy” and certainly, if we are to believe the anthropologist

supernatural tales; an activity that, because of the discreet power-dynamics which underpin it, serves as a useful tool in her critique of patriarchy. Focusing on the supernatural tales, “A Wedding Chest” (1888) and “Dionea” (1890), I will examine two principal forms of gift-event: the devotional gift (including eucharistic and votive offerings) and the mythic “Greek Gift” (containing implicit allusions to the Trojan conflict).² I will argue that, for Lee, Christian and Greek epic narrative are kindred forms of patriarchal mythology which describe or support an economy of giving that involve the subjection and / or exclusion of women.

Lee’s reference to the “Judgement of Paris” in “Dionea,” for instance, advances a narrative key centred around the Trojan conflict: source of the original “Greek gift.” The mytheme is an apt point of reference for Lee, since it dramatises those honorific and patriarchal dimensions of gift-exchange that are central to her own treatment of the theme. An epistolary tale comprised of letters between a Dr Alessandro De Rosis and Lady Evelyn Savelli (Princess of Sabina), “Dionea” tells the story of a shipwrecked child found on the shore of Montemirto Ligure. In one episode “Dionea,” now a beautiful and enigmatic woman, is discovered narrating a version of the Judgement of Paris to the village children. A favourite subject of Renaissance art, the Judgement of Paris is commonly cited as an example of Western visual power relations. Invariably depicting Paris in a seated or reclining position—and the naked goddesses assembled before him—popular representations of the myth reveal, to borrow a phrase from Daryl Ogden, the “supremacy of male eyes” (Ogden 2005, 1). Not only does The Judgement of Paris—and particularly its visual interpretations—portray Venus, Juno and Minerva as surveyed, objectified entities, but Venus’s gift of Helen presents

and early theorist of the gift, Marcel Mauss, gift-giving is but another mode of economic circulation. For Derrida “economy implies the idea of exchange, of circulation, of return” and thus the instant a gift-event commands reciprocal action—whether a symbolic or material return—it ceases to exist *as* gift; the latent egoism that drives the activity means that it belongs more properly to the realm of economic exchange (Derrida 1992, 6-7).

² “A Wedding Chest” was first published in the journal *Art and Letters* 2 (1888): 5-16.

woman as a mere commodity or given object within a culture of exchange defined by patriarchal values. Drawing on Laura Mulvey's seminal essay on cinematic scopophilia, Michael Squire bluntly remarks that "antiquity understood Helen as Mulvey's 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. She was the archetypal shaggable object – the passive pawn of patriarchal power passed from one owner to the next" (Squire 2011, 82).

The idea that female bodies might be conceived as things "given" and exchanged within a patriarchal system of exchange is one that is developed by Luce Irigaray in her essay, "Women on the Market." Using Marx's remarks on the form and nature of the commodity, Irigaray argues that women, far from being active participants within capitalist mechanisms of exchange, are structured as passive commodities (or "value-invested idealities") whose worth is determined by "masculine sexuality" (Irigaray 1985, 181). She points out that "[t]he economy—in both the narrow and the broad sense—that is in place in our societies thus requires that women lend themselves to alienation in consumption, and to exchanges in which they do not participate, and that men be exempt from being used and circulated like commodities" (172). The idea that woman is appropriated for her sexual and reproductive functions, is an important feature of Lee's own essay "The Economic Parasitism of Women," a piece originally written as a preface for the Italian edition of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Women and Economics* (1898).³ Following Gilman, Lee considers the asymmetric relationship that has evolved between the sexes, arguing that the sequestration of woman from the activity of money-making, means that she has become "part and parcel of the home"—effectively "amalgamated with the man's property, a piece of property herself, body and soul" (Lee 1908, 270). This gender asymmetry, Lee remarks, might be figured as "a big

³ The Italian edition, *Le donne e l'economia sociale*, was published in 1902. Correspondence housed at Somerville College, Oxford reveals that Lee and Gilman were communicating about the volume in 1900. For an account of the nature of this correspondence see Patricia Pulham. 2003. "A Transatlantic Alliance: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Vernon Lee." In *Feminist Forerunners (New) Womanism and Feminism in the Early Twentieth Century*, edited by Ann Heilmann, 34-43. London: Pandora Press.

man. . . holding in his hand a little woman; a god (if we are poetical, and if we face the advantages of the case) protecting a human creature; or (if we are cynical, and look to the disadvantages) a human being playing with a doll” (Lee 1908, 270-1). For Lee, “animation” is merely a matter of perspective since, in relation to man, woman is both “human creature” and “doll” (indeed, in either condition, she is regarded as a commodity or “slave” to be “stolen or bought”).

In similar ways, Lee’s supernatural tales highlight this “thingness” of woman within a social (gift) economy that measures worth against those male-conceived markers of value: beauty and purity. Impressed with a representational value derived from mythic and art-historical indicators, the objects of Lee’s aesthetic imagination explore a range of gendered subject positions. Her female *objets d’art*, imagined as corpses, sculptures and other motionless forms, emerge as surveyed entities—to use Lee’s own words, “piece[s] of property” circulating within a misogynistic culture of exchange and valued for the erotic capital she affords her possessor (Lee 1908, 270).⁴

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⁴ Of course, the prevalence of human objects can, in part, be attributed to the materialist complexion of Lee’s literary imagination. In her essay on Lee’s ethics of consumption Kristin Mahoney, for instance, notes that Lee’s “sensitivity to the separate life of objects” might be traced as far back as 1870 when her story, “Les aventures d’une pièce de monnaie” appeared in the Swiss journal, *La famille*—Lee was just 14 (Mahoney 2007, 40). For Mahoney, Lee’s abiding preoccupation with economic themes (and the politics of consumption, in particular), culminates in a desire to shield aesthetic experience from the ahistorical consumerist impulse of the contemporary “desiring subject” (41). Mahoney argues that by insisting on the ‘re-auraticization of objects,’ Lee offers an “ethical corrective to the subjectivism of modern consumer practices” (39). But Lee’s “sensitivity” to the object’s “separate life” has implications beyond her ideas about ethical consumption. Lee dramatises *both* the sentience of the individual object and the object-ness of the individual life, creating a feedback relationship between subject and object—body and thing—which draws attention to a troubling uncertainty about what is, and what is not, the proper material of economic exchange.

Like “Dionea”, Lee’s “A Wedding Chest,” deploys mythic and art-historical images to launch its critique of male-dominated forms of exchange. The tale opens with the catalogue entry for an artefact housed at the Smith museum: the panel of a fifteenth century Umbrian wedding coffer, entitled, after Petrarch, “The Triumph of Love” (Lee 2006, 229). Returning to its Renaissance setting and the narrative underlying the dismantled relic, the story reveals how Desiderio of Castiglione del Largo, craftsman of the coffer commissioned by a Messer Troilo Baglioni, is engaged to his employer’s daughter, Monna Maddelena. Troilo, harbouring a libidinous desire for the affianced Maddelena and having the misfortune to see his advances rebuked, gives orders for her abduction on the eve of their wedding. A year following her disappearance, Maddelena is returned in the coffer, “naked as God had made [her], dead, with two stabs in the neck . . . having on her breast the body of an infant recently born, dead like herself” (237). Attached to the coffer is a parchment bearing the inscription: “To Master Desiderio; a wedding gift from Troilo Baglioni of Fratta” (237). After a period of exile in Rome, the aggrieved Desiderio returns to exact revenge on Messer Troilo. Taking sacrament, Desiderio vows “never to touch food save the Body of Christ till he could taste the blood of Messer Troilo” (240). True to his word, on apprehending Troilo, who is “going to a woman of light fame,” Desiderio delivers a fatal stab to his chest, declaring: “This is from Maddalena, in return for her wedding chest!” (241). Then, he “stooped over [Troilo’s] chest and lapped up the blood as it flowed” (241).

Prior to Maddelena’s abduction and in an attempt to win her favour, Troilo delivers a succession of curios, including the “knot of ribbons off the head of a ferocious bull, whom he had killed *singulari vi ac virtute*” (235).⁵ Maddelena, not unaware of the contract embedded

⁵ In an “Account of the Spanish Bullfights” featured in an 1823 edition of *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, an anonymous correspondent explains how “[t]he bulls each have a knot of ribbons of different colours fixed near to their shoulder, so that referring to a printed list, this badge declares their breed and province . . . The Piccadore will sometimes snatch the ribbons from his shoulder, which is considered as highly dexterous and greatly applauded” (1824,

within the gift, “showed herself very coy and refused all presents which he sent her” yet, in so doing, poses a challenge to the natural economy of giving and one that would prove unwittingly fatal (235). As Mauss points out, “to refuse to accept is tantamount to declaring war; it is to reject the bonds of alliance and commonality” and certainly for Lee, the gift more frequently harbours an act of treachery than of beneficence (Mauss 2002, 17). It is unsurprising, then, that “A Wedding Chest” contains a sub rosa key to the pattern of self-interest and dissimulation that will characterise the tale’s subsequent gift events. The key resides in a panel depicting the region of happy love, one of “four phases of amorous passion” that ornament the wedding coffer (230-1). Here, Troilo is “depicted in the character of Troilus, son of Priam, emperor of Troy” (233). The story of Troilus, as we know, varies between sources, but one element these accounts share is the prophecy that Troy would survive should Troilus advance to the age of twenty. Cast in the figure of Troilus, Troilo’s fate is thus aligned with the ancient city of Troy; both receive a gift that would signal their fall. The sequence of exchange—initiated with the return of Maddalena’s body, “a gift of unspeakable wickedness for the father” and terminated with Desiderio’s fatal blow, “from Maddelena, in return for her wedding chest”—is, more properly, a series of assaults in a larger context of conflict: a conflict that culminates, aptly enough, in a stratagem. Desiderio, on returning to Perugia, had “dyed his hair black and grown his beard, after the manner of the Easterns, saying he was a Greek coming from Ancona” (240). In this Trojan horse disguise, the craftsman makes a final, unequivocal return on Troilo’s own bloody offering, advancing figuratively, and literally, a Greek gift.

301). Lee visited Spain between 1888-89 and refers to the bullfight in her preface to “The Virgin of the Seven Daggers” which she published in *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Tales* (1927). Here she articulates her “detestation” for the “Spanish cultus of death” which she suggests takes root in the “Spanish mud”: a substance composed “half and half of *auto da fés* and bull fights” (Lee 2006, 245). It is therefore probable that Lee, aware of the ritual, deploys the anatomical knot of ribbons to signal the malignancy of Troilo’s gift, which is principally honorific in nature.

The principle of reciprocity that is central to gift-exchange operates in tandem with the figures of blood and circulation in Lee's story. Actors in the triad formed of Troilo, Desiderio and Maddalena's father, Ser Piero Bontempi, for instance, pay and are restituted for their enterprise in blood; Troilo, makes a return on his seizure with the bloody remains of Maddalena, Desiderio "laps" up Troilo's blood in order to amortise (by proxy) the debt owed to Maddalena and Ser Piero, for his craven relinquishment of Maddalena, is struck "on the mouth till he bled" (236). In the mid to late-nineteenth century the blood-money analogy is often linked to economic distribution and circulation; notably, Herbert Spencer, in his essay "The Social Organism" (1860) aligns the "blood-discs" of the biological organism with coins or, money in the social one (Spencer 1883, 418). In recognition of the fact that in "the lower animals, the blood contains no corpuscles; and in societies of low civilization, there is no money," Spencer posits that "circulation" becomes apparent "only at a certain stage of [evolutionary] organisation" (Spencer 1883, 419).⁶ "Circulation," then, insignia of biological and civilisational progress, operates in a sophisticated "body-politic" quite apart from the primordial economy of blood characteristic to Lee's gift-exchange. While Lee offers a consonant model of circulation, her tendency is not, as Spencer, to analogise but rather to *realise* the equivalence between blood and money in a de facto somatic currency.

Pointing to a haematic adaptation of the gift-exchange, the circulation of blood is linked to some striking moments of physical consumption and abnegation. Ser Piero, robbed of his daughter, "wept, and cursed wickedly, and refused to take food" (236) and likewise Desiderio vowed "never to touch food . . . till he could taste the blood of Messer Troilo" (240). Fasting was certainly common in Renaissance Italy (in various seasons, including Lent) but while this physical abstention has a clearly Christological basis (to which I shall

⁶ For a more detailed analysis of the blood-money homology—with special consideration to George Simmel, Arrthur Crump, H.D Macleod and George H. Pownall—see: Turley Houston, 2005, 118-19.

return), it is equally connected to economic circulation, specifically a violation of rules of economic exchange (Cohen & Cohen 2001, 103). As an unlawful seizure of capital, Troilo's abduction functions for Ser Piero and Desiderio as a direct inversion of the "consumption" principle whilst Maddalena's doll-like passivity renders her more properly commodity than human agent. In this way, physical abstention becomes the figurative expression of economic loss; the revelation that Ser Piero, being "the father of other children . . . conquered his grief" (and with it, his appetite) moreover points to the fact that Piero's estate, possessed of surplus offspring, is capable of absorbing the cost of Troilo's extortion in a way that Desiderio, a mere craftsman, cannot (236).

Desiderio's own fast is conversely broken in a moment of vampiric mania when he "lapped up [Troilo's] blood as it flowed" from the wound in his chest (241). Patricia Pulham, in remarking the potentially homoerotic relations between Troilo and Desiderio, states that "Desiderio's vampire-like lapping of Troilo's blood arguably functions as an act of introjection which, given the "two stabs" that mark Maddalena's neck, suggests a form of vampiric consummation of his relationship with Maddalena mediated via the androgynous body of Troilo's corpse" (Pulham 2008, 86). As an erotic act, Desiderio's assault is situated within a libidinal economy that conflates Christian and classical symbolism. Within the system of exchange that defines the relationship between father, son-in-law and seducer, Desiderio's three fatal blows (delivered "in return" for Maddalena's chest) allude both to Trojan horse (with the connotations of sexual penetration this figure carries) and the holy trinity.

Evoking a range of quasi-Christian ritual, the literary vampire invariably assimilates the eucharist or Holy Sacrament into the broader economy of blood (capital). In "A Wedding Chest," it is the eucharist that emerges as the main tropological constituent, of which "the vampiric" is but one form of expression. Desiderio's final return on Troilo's "gift of

unspeakable wickedness” is significantly prefaced by the communion he receives from Ser Piero’s brother, the priest of Saint Severus (n.237):

And he went to the priest, prior of Saint Severus, and brother of Ser Piero, and discovered himself to him, who although old, had great joy in seeing and hearing of his intent. And Desiderio confessed all his sins to the priest and obtained absolution, and received the body of Christ with great fervour and compunction; and the priest placed his sword on the altar, beside the gospel, as he said mass, and blessed it. And Desiderio knelt and made a vow never to touch food save the Body of Christ till he could taste the blood of Messer Troilo (240).

For Desiderio, the eucharist operates as the symbolic settling of accounts. To receive the “gift” of sacrament is to enter a state of divine reciprocation. Indeed, according to the Christological economy of salvation, the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ serves to discharge man’s debt, in order that he stand free before God. Adalbert Hamman, writing on Saint Irenaeus, an early Christian thinker and Bishop of Lyons, points out that:

For Irenaeus, the eucharist is the sacrament of the economy, or the unfolding divine plan, as revealed to us in the person and work of Christ. Faith and eucharist, eucharist and faith are inseparable and reciprocal: “our manner of thinking is conformed to the eucharist and the eucharist confirms our manner of thinking” (Adv, Haer.IV, 18,5). The eucharist is the center and the content of faith and contains the whole economy of the son of God (Hamman 1978, 95).

Thought of in these terms, the eucharistic economy is necessarily a gift economy. The tautology “Faith and eucharist, eucharist and faith,” as a statement of equivalence, affirms the principle of reciprocity built up around the divine beneficence of Christ. Like Marcel Mauss, who posits the absolute obligation to give and receive, Irenaeus acknowledges the tacit *quid pro quo* of the eucharistic ritual. Proclaiming that “the savior redeemed us with his blood and gave his soul for our soul, his flesh for our flesh,” Irenaeus demands from the collective

beneficiaries of this, the ultimate sacrifice, a faithful and commensurate return: flesh for flesh, soul for soul.⁷

Desiderio, then, in what should properly be regarded as an act of debt-consolidation, receives sacrament and in so doing enters into a binary exchange that vanquishes all others. Thus pledging himself to God, Desiderio receives divine favour in the object of his sword, which is placed by the gospel and blessed. The fact that divine favour *is* conferred upon Desiderio is, as I point out, evident in the triadic structures that manifest around the sequence. The tripartite significance of Troilus's name, at once triad troil and Trojan, prefigures the trinity to be revisited upon him; for "three days and nights [Desiderio] watched and dogged [Troilus]" and on appertaining him, "ran his sword three times through his chest" (240, 241).

Lee's 1890 story "Dionea," reproduces some of the strategies of "A Wedding Chest," using mythic imagery to explore the economic relations between sexes. The eponymous foundling of Lee's tale is the subject onto which various male representational fantasies are transposed. The letters of Dr Alessandro De Rosis, which constitute the sole documentation of the epistolary tale, wistfully conflate the "squall" that casts Dionea onto the Ligurian shore with the "wicked sea" from which "Venus Verticordia" emerged in the classical age (Lee 2006, 77). As Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham explain, Dionea's adopted village,

⁷ Interestingly, contemporary literary criticism tends to equate the literary vampire with late nineteenth-century economic activity, chiefly: market centralisation and corporate monopoly. Both Franco Moretti and Gail Turley Houston, draw parallels between Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and end-of-century economics. Moretti states that: "If the vampire is a metaphor for capital, [and for Moretti, it is] then Stoker's vampire, who is of 1897, must be the capital of 1897. The capital which, after lying 'buried' for twenty long years of recession, rises again to set out the irreversible road to concentration and monopoly" (Moretti 1983, 92). Similarly Houston points out that "[t]he term 'Dracula' is . . . an amalgamated corporation of vampires of which he is the brains; a process or procedure of (capitalist) infinite circulation (of the commodity of blood); and the extensive hybrid streams of consciousness (and blood) of a group of accountants (Van Helsing, etc) who attempt to bankrupt the artificial personality of the incorporated Dracula" (Turley Houston 2005, 117). Certainly, following Marx's 1867 conceptualisation of capital as vampire (sucking the 'living blood of labour'), the vampire figure is seen both to allegorise contemporary economic conditions, whilst also—in line with the rise of evolutionary economics in the latter part of the century—highlight a retrogressive or, devolutionary, movement in *fin-de-siècle* pecuniary arrangements (Marx 1973, 257).

Montemirto Ligure, translates to “myrtle mountain”; given that the myrtle is a shrub associated with Venus, the settlement may be counted among the many allusions that link Dionea to the goddess (Maxwell and Pulham 2006, 77n). Indeed, like her mythic counterpart, Dionea becomes muse—the erotic material which inspires the male artist’s creative imagination.

As the tale records, the sculptor Waldemar and his wife, Lady Gertrude, make an extended visit to the Doctor and shortly after their arrival recognise Dionea as a suitable model for the artist. In fact, it is Lady Gertrude who procures Dionea for her husband. Cutting the figure of the vampire, Gertrude appears as a “pale, demure, diaphanous creature” who is “not the more earthly for approaching motherhood” (97). Morbidly anaemic, she scans the “girls of [the] village with the eyes of a slave-dealer” before alighting on the fleshly form of Dionea (97). Following a period of intensive activity, Waldemar’s frustration surrounding the “superiority of the model over the statue” peaks; he becomes increasingly volatile and exhibits a peculiar interest in one of the Doctor’s antiques: a Venus altar possessing “two little gutters ... for collecting the blood of the victim” (100-1). One evening, when Waldemar is working late—having “placed Dionea on the big marble block behind the altar [with] a great curtain of dull red brocade . . . behind her”—Gertrude creeps downstairs to a desecrated chapel, Waldemar’s temporary studio (103). A tragedy ensues, as the Doctor reports:

We found her [Gertrude] lying across the altar, her pale hair among the ashes of the incense, her blood – she had but little to give, poor white ghost! – trickling among the carved garlands and rams’ heads, blackening the heaped-up roses. The body of Waldemar was found at the foot of the castle cliff. He had hoped, by setting the place on fire, to bury himself among its ruins, or had he not rather wished to complete in this way the sacrifice, to make the whole temple an immense votive pyre? (104)

Economically dependent and relatively friendless, Dionea is theoretically vulnerable to the needs of the Doctor’s wealthy and influential visitors, and certainly, Lady Gertrude’s vampire-like pursuit, and ultimate purchase of Dionea’s services (or, more accurately, her

naked form), constitutes an act of subordination bordering on prostitution. However, in the visual power relations between artist and subject, Dionea emerges as victor, continually eluding Waldemar's attempts to fix her likeness in stone. As Catherine Maxwell remarks, "Dionea" deals with "uncontainable female energy," Vernon Lee's "strange, beautiful, demanding women [have] something about them that eludes fixed representation, and certainly possession" (Maxwell 1997, 265). The fire marks the apogee of the dialectic between sexes as Waldemar's "rapt[urous] contemplation" of the girl's beautiful form expends itself in what is, essentially, an act of sublime sumptuary destruction (98).

Dionea's victory, however, occurs only after Waldemar has disposed of his wife in sacrifice to the goddess and, in this way, fulfills his role as *pater familias*. As a corpse Gertrude is concretised in Waldemar's representational fantasy, and at the same time reduced to the status of (sacrificial) gift. Noting similarities between Dionea and Gertrude—both are likened to Madonnas—Pulham suggests that Lee "posits Dionea as a double . . . of the artist's wife" (Pulham 2008, 141). It is interesting, therefore that Lady Gertrude's acquisition of Dionea is presaged in The Judgement of Paris, a tale which Dionea adapts for the village children. As we know, following Paris's judgement in Venus's favour, he abducts Helen of Sparta with the goddess's help: an act that supposedly ignites the Trojan conflict. Dionea's adaptation of the tale places Lady Gertrude in an analogous position both to Dionea and her prototype, Venus (who, like Gertrude, appropriates a fellow woman as gift for their male consort or lover). For Pulham, this "twinning" suggests a homoerotic attachment between women. Certainly, Gertrude's rapt contemplation of Dionea's beautiful body bears this reading out, but I would suggest that the doubling of these characters serves a further purpose. That is, in operating as double, Dionea realises her identity as Venus and embodies those qualities of sensuality and self-government that Lady Gertrude, in her position of wife, has sought to repress.

Pertinently, in her remarks on early representations of the Judgement of Paris mytheme, the classicist Jane Harrison—with whom, as Pulham points out, Lee was acquainted—notes a form of visual metonymy which makes it impossible to “distinguish the goddesses from the gifts they bring” (Pulham 2008, 109).⁸ She continues, “they are charities, Gift-bringers. They are their own gift” (Harrison 1980, 298). Harrison earlier remarks that the story “is sufficiently patriarchal to please the taste of Olympian Zeus himself” and, along similar lines, these comments draw attention to the ways in which the female body is reduced, in representational activity, to the status of object, gift or commodity. Though Harrison’s *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* was not published until 1903, there are interesting parallels between Lee’s treatment of the idea of woman and gift in visual representation and Harrison’s.

Lee would not be the first to deploy the figure of Venus to explore visual power relations. The eponymous Venus in furs of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s 1870 novella has been read, for instance, as a “sublimated object of desire” within male “picture-making activity” (Stewart 1999, 76). As Suzanne Stewart remarks, Masoch’s Venus is an archetype on which a “long catalog of literary and mythological references” are overlaid. The tale—which describes how the dilettante, Severin becomes slave to his Venus-like lover, Wanda—contains numerous pictorial reproductions which include a sculptural replica of a Florentine Venus and photographic copy of Titian’s *Venus with the Mirror*. This art-historical Venus—having rather less to do with the desirability of the subject itself than with the “masochistic subjectivity” that demands her cold “self-sufficiency”—is “fixed,” according to Stewart, in a

⁸ Pulham points out that “Lee had met Harrison in London and was to write on Harrison’s work, delivering a lecture entitled ‘Sympathy versus Group Emotion’ á propos of Miss Jane Harrison’s Alpha and Omega’ to the Cambridge ‘Heretics’ on 6 June 1915” (Pulham 2008, 109).

synchronic moment of erotic picturing.⁹ For Albrecht Koschorke too, the Hegelian dialectic suggested by Masoch's tale (the tale's unnamed narrator, it should be noted, falls asleep reading Hegel), reveals itself to be a rather less a fight-to-the-death of the sexes, than a "stagnant dialectic" (Koschorke 2001, 562-3). Like Stewart, Koschorke argues that male masochistic subjectivity creates a kind of immobility at the level of representation. Since the identity of the tyrannical Wanda is sustained by countless mythic references, "propagated through wall-paintings [and] mirror-images," Masoch's story does not, as one might assume, narrate the dialectical emergence of a conquering (gendered) consciousness but rather, a *mis an abyme* of "ecstatic stagnation" (553). Even within the masochistic framework of Masoch's tale, the projection of mythic and art-historical images onto the figure of Wanda mean that woman is divest—in Hegelian terms—of being-for-self, which is expressed as pictorial stasis.

While, as I point out, Lee seeks to expose the paralysis of the female body within male representational frameworks, in "Dionea" it is not the logic of stasis that drives the dialectical tension between sexes, but a more dynamic one. While Dionea is the subject onto which various male representational fantasies are conferred, she is not (in the manner of Gertrude) immobilised by Waldemar's "picture making activity," offering instead a *fulfilment* of Masoch's suspended dialectic. Hegel's master-slave dialectic, which serves as a useful tool to describe the power-struggle between Dionea and her "proprietors," requires that the anthropogenetic desire or, "desire that generates self-consciousness," of a potential "master," assert itself over a "slavish" consciousness in order to achieve "recognition" as the ascendant conscious being.¹⁰ Alexandra Kojève explains that "[t]he being that eats, for example, creates

⁹ As Stuart points out, for Masoch, the "sublimatory process turns [the gaze of desire] into a substance, a Thing..." (Stuart 1999, 63).

¹⁰ In the struggle that Hegel describes, the consciousness that exhibits a self-preservation instinct becomes, ultimately, the enslaved party in a symbiotic relationship. The desire to survive, notwithstanding potentially compromised conditions, leads the subordinate party to "recognise" the "supreme value" or, animal consciousness of the "master". This is pertinent for Lee's tale because the material conditions of Dionea's life depend entirely on her patrons.

and preserves its own reality by overcoming a reality other than its own [...] by the “assimilation,” the “internalization” of a “foreign,” “external reality” (Kojève 1980, 4). So too does the ascendant party of Lee’s tale, Waldemar, validate his own (artistic) consciousness by the consumption of an external reality: Dionea. In the following passage, which includes Kojève’s own explanatory insertions, Hegel characterises the enslaved consciousness as:

a consciousness that [being in fact a living corpse – the man who has been defeated and spared] does not exist purely for itself, but rather for another Consciousness [namely, that of the victor]: i.e. a Consciousness that exists as a *given-being*, or in other words, a Consciousness that exists in the concrete form of *thingness* (Kojève 1980, 16).¹¹

That the enslaved consciousness is not recognised as animate and exists, for the master, as mere “thing” or significantly “given” thing, has important implications for Lee’s tale.¹² As the Doctor reports: “I could never have believed that an artist could regard a woman so utterly as a mere inanimate thing, a form to copy, like a tree or flower. Truly he carries out his theory that a sculpture knows only the body, and the body scarcely considered as human” (98). A “*given-being*,” the product of Lady Waldemar’s voracious “kindness,” Dionea figures, for the artist, as no more than a “concrete form of *thingness*” or, “living corpse”. The latter is significant, given the prevalence of the (eroticised) corpse in Lee’s tales, because it

¹¹ This passage is translated as “a consciousness which is not purely for itself but for another, i.e. is a merely *immediate* consciousness, or consciousness in the form of *thinghood*” (Hegel 1977, 115).

¹² Kojève translates the German “*Seiendes*” to “given-being” (“*être-donné*” in the original French) which has important implications for my own reading because it is precisely as a “gifted” consciousness or being that I read Dionea’s involvement with the Waldemars. “*Seiendes*” which, more commonly denotes the state of being or existence can also refer to the act of coming into or, *giving* existence. It is evidently in this sense of “giving” —which accurately describes the subordination of the slavish consciousness—that Kojève has derived his meaning but we should be aware that, as James H. Nichols Jr., points out : “Kojève’s translations of Hegelian terms are not the customary ones, but represent his interpretation of their meaning” (Nichols 1980, xiii). Thanks to Anna Pilz (University College Cork) for her help with the translated texts.

highlights the striking lack of female agency. “A Wedding Chest,” for instance, sexualises the naked corpse of Maddalena and Lee’s later tale, “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady” (1896), similarly describes how the Prince’s pet grass snake (his godmother, a woman that metamorphosises into reptilian form during daylight hours) reverts, in death, to the “body of a woman, naked, and miserably disfigured with blows and sabre cuts” (Lee 2006, 227).

The master-slave dialectic crucially requires that the enslaved party is not “recognised as an independent self-consciousness”; in fact, the slave is the only one of the two parties in possession of this kind of external recognition. The upshot of this, according to Kojève, is that the Master “is always enslaved by the world of which he is [ascendant] . . . it is only his death that ‘realizes’ his freedom” (Kojève 1980, 29). Waldemar’s manifest failure to realise Dionea’s form in clay, and the frustration culminating in his “obliteration” of the “exquisite” but nonetheless inferior duplicate, mirrors, in Hegel’s dialectical relationship, the Master’s inability to recognise the subordinate consciousness. Waldemar’s fatal “recognition” of Dionea’s true identity as Venus is reinforced by the contextual clues provided by her placement; posing the girl in the “old desecrated chapel . . . that was once the temple of Venus,” Waldemar illuminates her naked form “by an artificial light. . . the way in which the ancients lit up statues in their temples” and before the altar of Venus procured from the Doctor (102, 103). As Dionea is revealed, in this way, as Venus, Waldemar faces “recognition” of another consciousness: a recognition that, as “Master,” necessarily leads to his self-sacrifice. Thus Waldemar’s “freedom” is, in Hegelian terms, a fatal and reciprocal recognition of the archetypal female psyche.

The Master-Slave dialectic does not, for the reason of competition, allow for the kind of reciprocal arrangement characteristic to the votive or, eucharistic economies of “A Wedding Chest.” As Kojève points out “the two [parties] do not give themselves reciprocally to one another, nor do they get themselves back in return from one another through

consciousness” (Kojève 1980, 14). Indeed, the “immense votive pyre” offered in worship, or acknowledgement of Dionea’s ascendancy is, as I point out, a uni-directional movement of capital: Waldemar’s wife, the product of his labour and his props are all absorbed, exigently into an “immense” votive vortex (104). Significantly, Waldemar takes the life of his spouse in a sacrificial offering that, as gift of blood from wife to idol, has specifically vampiric overtones. Gertrude, found “lying across the altar,” seeps blood—of which “she had but little to give”—onto “the carved garlands and rams’ heads,” a scene that strangely prefigures the anaemic bloodletting of Stoker’s own Lucy Westenra (104). In this sense, Waldemar not only mediates the haematic exchange between Gertrude and Dionea, but reveals himself as proprietor of the “asset” thus disposed of. The offering, then, serves not to criticise the malign self-interest that debases gift and giving, but operates as an ideological inversion of the patriarchal economy of exchange that so often, in Lee’s fiction, claims woman as its sacrificial gift. In Waldemar’s moment of surrender, Dionea “dialectically overcomes” her oppressor and, in Hegelian terms, “posits [*her*]*self* as a negative in the permanent order of things, and hereby becomes for [*her*]*self*” (Hegel 1977, 118). This is to say that Dionea, now capable of “negation,” sets “at nought the existing shape confronting [*her*]”—the shape, that is, of patriarchy in the person of Waldemar—and in so doing becomes *herself*, the archetypal feminine icon: Venus. Dionea’s liberation is symbolically affirmed in her escape on a Greek vessel that, set “full sail to sea,” conveys the girl, braced against the mast with “a robe of purple and gold about her, and her myrtle-wreath on her head” (104). Gertrude, who is conversely victim of the patriarchy Waldemar administers, is curiously spectral; she is an unearthly “diaphanous creature” who, in death, resembles a “white ghost” with little blood to sacrifice to the goddess (97,104). Gertrude’s liminality, her wraithlike physicality bespeaks of her failure to break free from the bonds of servitude and acquire, like Dionea, phenomenal reality or, in Hegelian terms “being-for-self” (Hegel 1977, 118).

Transposing the gender of the sacrificial being, Lee imagines a theistic economy in which woman rules sovereign. According to Jane Harrison, writing shortly after Lee, “matriarchal theology,” predates the “patriarchal mythology” of Hesiod and others (Harrison 1980, 283-4). Harrison points out, for instance, that where the goddess Pandora is conceived as “Earth-born” in primitive Greek culture, by the time of Hesiod’s mythology, she is figured as “the handiwork of Olympian Zeus” (284). Harrison remarks: “Zeus the Father will have no great Earth-Goddess, Mother and Maid in one, in his man-fashioned Olympus, but her figure is from the beginning, so he re-makes it; . . . she who made all things, gods and mortals alike, is become their plaything, their slave. . .” (285). Lee’s own particular reverence for the female gods of the Greek and Roman pantheon stems from a desire to re-instate the matriarch who, formerly ascendant, is displaced in the rise of patriarchal Christianity. Régis Debray articulates the demise of the female Gods, staking a position that appears to accord with Lee’s own. He writes:

If what was needed, whatever the cost, was a founding act of carnage, a union through murder, Freud, it would appear, confused genders: the cement of monotheism, the law of the Father, was made with the blood of the mother goddesses. The scapegoat strictly speaking should have been a she-goat. Sand and Sign restricted divinity to a regimen of dryness. Until the great turning point, however, divinity had been vitalistic and matrilinear: oral, visual, awash with rain piss and milk, a source of nourishment . . . the matricide occurred later. (Debray 2004, 158)

Rejecting Freud’s proposition that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ represents an oedipal impulse that is revisited, symbolically, in the Christian eucharist, Debray argues that the primordial deity was not a stale patriarch, but sundry fertile matriarchs, eliminated in the rise of the Christian religion. Like Debray who considers that Artemis is covertly re-imagined in the figure of the Virgin, Lee, in her preface to 1927 version of “The Virgin of Seven Daggers” similarly writes: “is she not the divine Mother of Gods as well as God, Demeter or Mary, in whom the sad and ugly things of our bodily origin and nourishment are transfigured . . . ?” (Lee 2006, 245). Not only, then, does Debray share Lee’s vision of a nourishing

eternal mother centred in the Holy Virgin, but also the conviction that within Christianity's theistic economy, the principal economic "players" are male. As is evident from my analysis of "A Wedding Chest," Lee shows herself particularly attuned to the patriarchy embedded not only within votive and eucharistic practices but in the broader Christological economy. The tale features the circulation of a female gift-object in a triad formed of Ser Piero, Desiderio and Troilus; the Holy Trinity revealed in these and in the tale's triadic structures, is associated with a male esoteric marketplace. Certainly, woman, who is powerless to participate in the exchange, becomes the erotic commodity circulated in an economy ostensibly presided over, or sanctioned by, God the father. While the Christological economy of salvation does, of course, evolve from an original act of *male* sacrifice, it operates in the context of a prototypical Maussian reciprocity (that is to say, the reciprocal obligation to give and receive). Freud notes that the Christian eucharist is a ritual whereby a "band of brothers . . . eats the flesh and blood of the son and no longer that of the father, the sons thereby identifying themselves with him and becoming holy themselves." He continues: "the reconciliation with the father is the more thorough because . . . there follows the complete renunciation of woman" (Freud, 1919, 254). Thus the eucharist, through its primitive oedipal aspirations, actively excludes woman. But central to the idea of the Greek gift is the promise of a return—a sinister fulfilment of the economic logic of the praxis—and Lee capitalises on these mythic associations, staging a return of the repressed female subject. In "Dionea," Waldemar's self-sacrifice, intended to supply the votive flame, signals Lee's ideological reversal of this principle and works to reinstate the Eternal mother to her antecedent position. Moreover, the sacrifice betokens a grand act of overcoming. In the Hegelian sense I have described, woman throws off the yoke of patriarchy to become, effectively, idol of the marketplace; she is not the passive agent of "A Wedding Chest" but a locus point of economic activity, voraciously absorbing the gifts of man, life and blood.

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